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ABSTRACT

The most ambitious connection that libraries can make in our time is the link between an individual and the rest of the world. Libraries are the places where books and other records of human memory and imagination are transmitted from one group of people to another, and librarians are the impresarios of the process. Personal experience and long study of Russian culture have shown that the answer to an important question is often more likely to be found in yesterday's book than in today's newspaper; deifying some books while denying access to others can be dangerous; and libraries can provide a quiet refuge for scholarly integrity. The American experience and example may be increasingly relevant to the world because: (1) the evolutionary American model may have more to offer than the absolutist models; (2) their various religious beliefs enable Americans to identify with a dimension of human experience that is incomprehensible in an atheistic society; (3) the maintenance of a civil, civic unity among diverse communities is an American aspiration that is becoming increasingly relevant as the world grows more diverse culturally, even as it becomes more interrelated technologically; and (4) Americans are strongly committed to higher education at a time when education and intellectual leadership in world politics are becoming increasingly important. The American type of democracy has depended on knowledge and grown through books, which are the individual's portable, affordable link with the memory, mind, and imagination of the rest of humanity, and the best guides we have for the exploration of our own basic humanity. Because the American example is so relevant, and because deepened and broadened knowledge has been so central to it, the necessity of getting more of our young people into creative contact with books and reading is an urgent concern for all American libraries. (SD)

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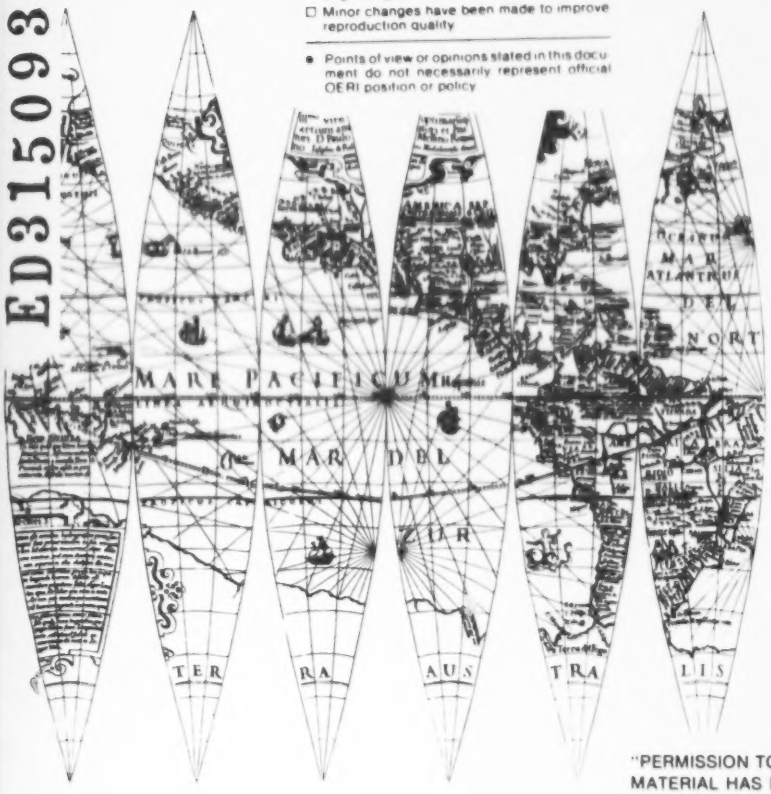

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JAMES H. BILLINGTON
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1988

CENTER FOR THE BOOK
VIEWPOINT SERIES
NO. 22

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PREFACE

In a ceremony on September 14, 1987, in the Great Hall of the Library of Congress, James H. Billington took the oath of office as the thirteenth Librarian of Congress. Participants in the event included Wendell H. Ford, chairman of the Committee on Rules and Administration, U.S. Senate; Thomas S. Foley, Majority Leader, U.S. House of Representatives; President Ronald Reagan, who nominated the new Librarian; and Chief Justice of the United States William H. Rehnquist, who administered the oath. In his remarks Dr. Billington expressed the hope that in the future the Library of Congress could move simultaneously in two general directions: "in more deeply," to strengthen the Library, its staff, and its services, and "out more broadly," to "make the riches of this place even more available to even wider circles of our multi-ethnic society."

To assist him in this effort, the new Librarian appointed a staff Management and Planning Committee and gave it the formidable one-year assignment of reviewing all of the Library's activities and making recommendations for the future. As part of the review process, Dr. Billington began visiting libraries around the country and meeting with librarians to discuss the roles and services of the Library of Congress. Often these forums were planned, as in Philadelphia, in conjunction with speeches to library and other groups. His Philadelphia talk, "Books and the World," was presented on April 13, 1988, under the auspices of Mellon Bank and

Friends of Libraries U.S.A. That evening the Librarian also opened the exhibition "Legacies of Genius: A Celebration of Philadelphia Libraries," held in the Historical Society of Pennsylvania and the Library Company of Philadelphia. The next morning he participated with members of the Management and Planning Committee in a forum with librarians from the area, held at the Free Library of Philadelphia.

The events of April 13-14 in Philadelphia gave the new Librarian of Congress an opportunity to present his views on the importance of books and libraries and to learn the opinions and concerns of the librarians and citizens of Philadelphia. It is appropriate that his remarks on April 13 be published by the Center for the Book, which has as its principal mission stimulating public interest in books, reading, and libraries. The center is grateful to Mellon Bank and Friends of Libraries U.S.A. for cosponsoring the publication of "Books and the World."

JOHN Y. COLE
Director
The Center for the Book

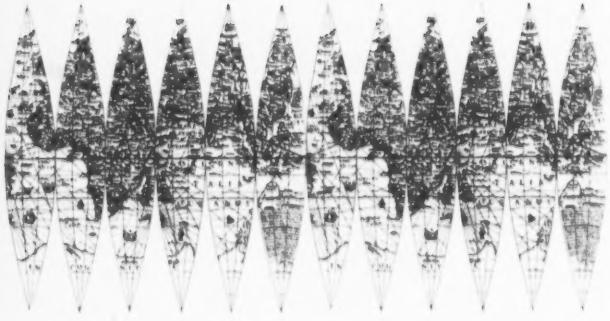
FOREWORD

The visit of Librarian of Congress James H. Billington to Philadelphia on April 13 and 14, 1988, was a significant occasion for us. Mellon Bank and Friends of Libraries U.S.A. were pleased to sponsor his speech "Books and the World," which he gave in conjunction with the opening of the "Legacies of Genius" exhibition. We also hosted a meeting between Dr. Billington and editors and publishers of the Philadelphia area. The discussion at that meeting resulted the next day in a significant editorial in the *Philadelphia Inquirer* about the importance of reading and the threat of illiteracy.

For nearly twenty years Mellon Bank has devoted energy, time, and funding to the support of libraries and the fostering of literacy. Its partner in this particular endeavor, Friends of Libraries U.S.A., is a national organization that develops and supports local friends of libraries groups, sharing information and experience among library supporters throughout the country. Both organizations are delighted to present Dr. Billington's eloquent Philadelphia speech to a wide audience.

RICHARD C. TORBERT
Mellon Bank
Friends of Libraries U.S.A.

BOOKS AND THE WORLD



Philadelphia's "Legacies of Genius" exhibition, which I had an opportunity to visit earlier today, reminds us of this city's remarkable history as a center for books, libraries, and scholarship. Many of the same institutions that collaborated on this exhibit were ones that stimulated me when I was a young scholar in Philadelphia. The fact of the exhibit itself signifies the beginning of a new era of cooperation among Philadelphia's impressive array of research libraries. Here we see beautifully on display the common purpose of research libraries rather than any of the competitive pettiness that sometimes demeans the scholarly world.

I have come with several of my colleagues from the Library of Congress not only to see this exhibit but to join in this same spirit of seeking cooperative relations during our two days of dialogue with you. Through a series of such national forums we are trying to define specific ways to improve cooperation and communication between the Library of Congress and this nation's libraries. We are look-

ing for a fresh start, so thank you for inviting us to Philadelphia, this marvelous city of beginnings.

It is the city of my own beginnings. My introduction to books began when I was a very small boy in Narberth. My brother and I used to go up the street to greet my father, who almost always returned in the evening on the Paoli local with both the evening *Bulletin* and a used book, bought at Leary's Book Store in Philadelphia, under his arm. Thus, as a child, I was surrounded with my family's own miscellaneous, personal but universal library.

Today, as Librarian of Congress and custodian of a truly universal library, I want to talk about the most ambitious connection that libraries can make, do make, and have to make in our time: the link between the smallest and the largest units on a library's radar screen, between an individual and the rest of the world. As a scholar, I also want to acknowledge my personal debt to libraries. They are the places where books and other records of human memory and imagination are transmitted from one set of people, the authors, to another, the readers. Libraries are the locus where the magic of this transmission takes place. Librarians are the impresarios of the process, the mediators of the magic.

How do books and librarians bring the lone individual into mature contact with the busy world—the big world with whose complexities we all have such deep and varied interrelationships? The mediation of books to people must begin early. It began for me with my father, who himself never had an advanced education. The books he brought home over the years had a special value-added quality—both because it was *he* who had bought them and because, coming from Leary's, they often contained the mysterious underlinings of a previous owner. These underlinings were, in a way, my introduction to scholarship—looking at them, I would wonder why one passage rather than another had been singled out as important.

It was a wonderful émigré lady from Chestnut Hill

who first conveyed the broader world to me through books. She taught me my first Russian words and phrases when I was a schoolboy during the war. When I asked why the Russians were doing so well at Stalingrad, she answered by saying, "Read *War and Peace*." I have always remembered that advice, first of all because all other books seemed short after that one, and second because her reply suggested that the answer to an important question was often more likely to be found in yesterday's book than in today's newspaper.

From my subsequent study of Russian culture, I learned two other lessons about books. One is the danger of deifying some books while denying freedom of access to others. In a culture where this is done, exaggerated expectations tend naturally to arise around the suppressed single book as the secret bearer of Utopian deliverance—Karl Marx's *Das Kapital* was the last in a long line of such books. Even today, the USSR encourages the idolization of some books and the neglect of others. A few U.S. authors are published there in enormous editions, but almost no American authors whose books describe the social and historical context of our nation are represented in even the best Soviet libraries. A text without a context can become a pretext.

The second lesson is more hopeful. In long stretches of research in Russian libraries from the late 1950s to the early 1970s I learned that libraries can provide a quiet refuge for scholarly integrity even under difficult conditions. Many of the finest scholars I have ever met were those who had simply retreated from the public arena and gladly accepted the comparative anonymity of library work, keeping alive in secret a heritage that could not be honored in public. What hope exists for the future in the Soviet Union today is rooted in the endeavors of those who have lived among books. The first steps of moral renewal in this age have been the release of a series of long-suppressed books by Anatolii Rybakov, Vasilii Grossman, and others.

At this important time of fresh ferment, it seems

especially tragic that the USSR should be struck by the worst single loss of cultural treasures anywhere in the world in recent years: the fire of February 14 and 15, 1988, in the great Library of the Academy of Sciences in Leningrad. I joined the Library of Congress's distinguished conservator, Peter Waters, in surveying the damage to books there: 400,000 destroyed and more than 3,000,000 damaged. The losses may even exceed those caused by the flood in Florence in 1966, but it is our hope that the Library of Congress can rapidly move to help in the restoration of this, the original library link between Russia and the West—both to help relations between our two countries and to reaffirm the essential solidarity between all libraries everywhere.

Here in Philadelphia you are enjoying this sense of common purpose among research libraries as sixteen area libraries share their treasures in an exhibition. The special American link between libraries and lawmakers that the Library of Congress illustrates actually began in this city. In 1774 the first Continental Congress assembled in Carpenters' Hall in the very building that housed the Library Company of Philadelphia; and one of that Congress's first corporate acts was to establish conditions for the borrowing privileges of books.

In March 1789 the first meeting of Congress in New York after the ratification of the Constitution also took place in a library building. In 1800 the link between lawmakers and libraries was sealed when President John Adams approved the act that created a Library of Congress to be housed in the new Capitol in Washington, D.C. Later, Thomas Jefferson guaranteed the universality of that collection both by offering his own wide-ranging library as the core of the national library and by stating his belief that no branch of knowledge was irrelevant to the potential concerns of legislators in this new type of republic.

At the Library of Congress, we are refurbishing the Thomas Jefferson Building, the great, late-nineteenth-

century expression of the universal reach of knowledge. To make this building a world center of recorded knowledge, its reading rooms will represent every region of the world and will showcase books from the nearly three-quarters of the Library's collections that are in languages other than English. As a student of a foreign culture, I worry about the decline of our ability to use foreign languages in the United States. As the Librarian of Congress, I worry about the massive disintegration of so much of the written record from the last 150 years, disintegration that occurs because of the manufacture and use of high-acid paper. And as a patriotic American, I worry that we may be faced with a more general erosion in our national life—in debt to others, in deficit with ourselves, indifferent to our self-indulgences, increasingly decadent, and perhaps even irrevocably declining, as our latest self-flagellating academic best-seller, *The Rise and Fall of Empires*, suggests.

It is my own view, however, that America is not in decline and that the American experience and example may indeed be increasingly relevant to the world. In the first place, *evolution* has now replaced *revolution* as the preferred pattern for social change and as a source of political legitimation. Despite some successes in extremely authoritarian societies like Cuba and Ethiopia, the inventory of Leninist revolutionary victories does not seem very impressive in the long postwar era. The real dynamism in social, economic, and political development in recent years has come from constructive evolution toward democracy rather than from destructive revolution leading to dictatorship. This has proven true in Western Europe and Japan, in southern Europe, in South America, and in South Asia, particularly in the case of India. To be sure, the revolutionary fire is still burning itself out on some of the peripheral killing fields of the third world. But as historians everywhere take stock of the horrors perpetuated in the name of revolutionary ideologies, the evolutionary American model with all its improvisations and imperfections may have more to of-

fer than the absolutist models with all their public myths and private murders.

A second force that may give new relevance to the American experience is the return of the Sacred. Far from becoming irrelevant as modernization proceeds, religion has in many parts of the world become a significant element within that process of change. The most unforeseen new phenomena of recent years in the communist and third worlds respectively—the rise of Solidarity in Poland and of Khomeni in Iran—were both political movements rooted in prophetic monotheism. Much of the unanticipated fresh dynamism of both conservative politics in North America and radical politics in Latin America has been linked with religion and religious leaders. Americans' individual concerns and commitments in the world of faith tend to perplex foreigners, and often we puzzle even ourselves. But their various religious beliefs enable Americans to identify with an entire dimension of human experience that is totally beyond the radar screen of atheistic communists, who are unable to understand the resurgent force of religion. Marxists find it incomprehensible that religion plays the role it does in rebuilding an independent civil society in opposition to the state in Poland—and even in East Germany and the Soviet Union itself.

A third area in which an old American ideal is becoming a growing global necessity is our commitment to religious and ethnic pluralism. The maintenance of a civil, civic unity among diverse communities is an American aspiration increasingly relevant to a world that grows ever more diverse culturally even as it becomes more interrelated technologically. America has been a proving ground for achieving a measure of unity out of diversity, and it could prove to be an experimental laboratory for the broader global community. To our older European and African base, we are now adding two new continents, through our principal new sources of immigration—the Latin American and the East Asian—which provide us in-

ternal links to major external problems facing us in the period ahead: our sociopolitical confrontation with Mexico and our economic and cultural confrontation with Japan. The Mexican confrontation will pull us south into greater interaction with the third world. Our already intimate link with Japan and the Pacific rim will draw us increasingly east into contact with cultures that are still foreign to us—but which must be grasped in new ways, representing as they do the most populous as well as the oldest civilizations on earth. Our greatest long-term challenge may well be learning to live harmoniously with the great Asian cultures, and I hope that students of the future will study them, as others of us have studied the Russian culture, and make even greater use than others have of the immense and often underused collections in all these languages at the Library of Congress.

And so we return to the need for research—so necessary in a world where we must increasingly live by our wits more than by our power. The fourth and final force at work in the world that gives new relevance to the American experience is the rising importance of education and intellectual leadership in world politics. The increase in the educated population of the world may be even more portentous than the global population explosion itself. The life of the mind has a vested interest in liberty, and liberal learning produces an inherent bias toward free societies. Our commitment to higher education is the largest, both relatively and absolutely, that the world has ever seen—and it acts as a magnet as well as an example for much of the world. Intensifying the pursuit for truth can help our economy become more competitive in the information age, but the pursuit in itself is ultimately noncompetitive. At a time when rising populations face finite resources, it may be that only in the expanding pursuit of truth can the horizons for our cherished ideal of freedom remain truly infinite. The pursuit of truth is the highest form of Jefferson's pursuit of happiness—and the ultimate fulfillment of

the American dream that things can go on getting better, that ours is a society where we should accept no answers from those who have stopped asking questions.

Because the American example is so relevant and because deepened and broadened knowledge has been so central to it, the necessity of getting more of our young people into creative contact with books and reading is an urgent concern for all our libraries. The Library of Congress and, in particular, the Center for the Book hope to work with libraries throughout the nation to make 1989 the "Year of the Young Reader." We hope to have your ideas on how to give this idea reality and vitality.

As we think about how our libraries in the future can serve not just our advanced scholars but our awakening children, it is important to stress the central moral importance of the enterprise of reading itself for the health of our kind of society: the very model toward which others, as I have suggested, seem to be gravitating in a number of ways. The moral imperative of reading arises first of all from the simple fact that our type of democracy has depended on knowledge and grown through books. By their very nature, books foster freedom with dignity. Books do not coerce, they convince. They speak to the active individual who confronts in private the voice of reason; they do not shriek to some passive crowd cowering before the megaphones of public authority.

Historically books have been the companions of a responsible democratic citizenry. They provide keys to the dynamism of our past and perhaps to our national competitiveness in the future. Books link the record of yesterday with the possibilities of tomorrow. Books have tended to bring things together for a widely scattered people, to digest information and turn it into knowledge. Libraries bring books together for people—books that disagree with one another—and require an active, individual response while slowly nurturing wisdom within those who live in and around them.

Northrop Frye has written that "the rear-view mirror is our only crystal ball." Time and again in the modern era we find inspiration for genuine innovation coming from a return to something old, the rediscovery of something forgotten, a fresh reading of something long neglected. The revolutionary skyscrapers of Chicago depended on Viollet-le-Duc rediscovering the Gothic in France; abstract painting in New York, on Kandinsky rediscovering the icons of Russia. So I see no contradiction between our determination at the Library of Congress and that of most modern research libraries both aggressively to explore the potential of new technologies for the information age and, at the same time, to conserve and restore older books from the past.

We preserve books not out of an instinctive clinging to the artifacts of memory, or even solely because books have encouraged democracy and spurred dynamism in our society. We treasure books because they are the individual's portable, affordable link with the memory, mind, and imagination of the rest of humanity—a moral antidote, if you like, to the creeping passivity, parochialism, and shortened attention spans of our video culture. Humanism was born in the late Middle Ages and flowered in the Renaissance among people who lived with and loved books. And our kind of civilization will need the mature humanism of people who live with books if we are to counter both inhuman ideologies from abroad and potentially dehumanizing forces from within.

Last but not least, books are the best guides we have for the exploration of our own basic humanity. They help us understand something of the world within as well as without, of the messy, middle state in which we all are forced to live as human beings—somewhere below the angels, but above the animals. We are a fallible species on a fragile planet, destined to live at the intersection between the natural and the supernatural, forever seeking mastery as we learn to live with mystery.

Whether fallen angels seeking mastery of the truth

or naked apes confronting the mystery of what is good and beautiful, we need all the guidebooks we can carry, for life is an awesome, often lonely mixture of outer exploration and inner discovery. Beyond the value of books in sustaining and making more dynamic our democracy lies the individual enrichment that books provide as each of us seeks in his or her own way to obtain the mastery of self necessary to sustain the mystery of creation.

Libraries are starting places for the adventure of learning that can go on whatever one's vocation and location in life. Reading is an adventure like that of discovery itself. Libraries are our base camps. The nature of the adventure can be illustrated by Columbus's voyage of discovery, the quincentenary of which we are preparing to celebrate in 1992.

Columbus did not find exactly what he was looking for. He was an Italian sailing for Spain in search of Asia. But because he was willing to take some risks, he found something even more important. He built adventure into the opening of the New World. And our America, which slowly emerged to the north, was, like ancient Israel, founded on a covenant to fulfill justice in time rather than on a compulsion to extend power in space. It was the pilgrims' alternative to older, more absolute empires. By limiting rather than expanding central power, by proclaiming rights before rules, and by harnessing power to a complex constitution rather than a simple ideology, the founders of this country produced an innovation so stunning that we have yet fully to understand it.

We must go on discovering America. Being an American is not a patent of privilege but an invitation to adventure. It involves spiritual aspiration as well as material achievement. It is the search for Faulkner's bear, Melville's whale, and Citizen Kane's rosebud; it is the hope that more buds of all colors will blossom in that future America which will value its technicolor as much as its technology. The American dream in our day must envision a deeper plural-

ism at home helping to secure a peaceful pluralism for all the earth.

Whether or not librarians are able to help people understand other people and other parts of the world, they ennoble their lives and their profession by the effort. When the Jesuit order finally left China in the early eighteenth century after the most nearly successful effort in history to build a bridge between that ancient Eastern culture and the Christian West, they left behind a haunting epitaph:

Abi, viator,	Go away, voyager,
Congratulatare mortuis,	Congratulate the dead,
Condole vivis.	Console the living.
Ora pro omnibus.	Pray for everyone.
Mirare e tace.	Wonder and be silent.

Wonder and be silent. This is easier for readers than for viewers, for adventurers than for spectators. There must have been wonder and silence for those first settlers who brought English language and culture to our own shores, when John Smith's party was thrown up by accident on Bermuda before reaching Virginia. Their shipwrecked interlude on an enchanted island appears to have fascinated—and may have directly inspired—the greatest poet of our language as he wrote his final play.

Shakespeare's *Tempest*, you will recall, tells how fantasy aided in self-discovery during an interlude on an island among people cast up there by a storm, who then return wiser to the larger world. Shakespeare, through the aged Prospero, tells us near the end that the value of a play briefly enacted on that island lay not in "the insubstantial pageant" that had faded but in the discovery that though "our little life is rounded with a sleep" we are, nonetheless, "such stuff as dreams are made on."

Whatever tempests lie ahead, may the mediators of intellectual discovery and adventure in our nation never be ashamed to dream. And, as we look ahead, may we also look back—even behind Shakespeare's final fantasy to Dante's earlier one: the alta fantasia in the last canto of the *Divine Comedy*, which was both a beatific and a geometric vision.

Many of the original European explorers who came to the northern part of the new world were searching for a Northwest Passage to the Pacific. The French philosopher Michel Serres has described the attempt in our time to reunify the humanities and the sciences, old books and new technologies, as the new "Northwest Passage" that we must both discover and learn to navigate. The custodians of books can be models as well as guides for gratifying man's basic instinct that things be whole and comprehensible. Truly good books strive for coherence and help us find, beyond the incoherence of the moment, the knowledge that the left and right halves of the brain come together in one human mind just as the hemispheres—east and west, north and south— are united as one planet.

JAMES H. BILLINGTON

The thirteenth Librarian of Congress, James Hadley Billington is a native of Philadelphia and was educated in the public schools of the Philadelphia area. He is an author, historian, and educator who, before his appointment as Librarian in 1987, was for fourteen years the director of the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars.

James Billington received his undergraduate degree from Princeton University, graduating as valedictorian of the class of 1950. Three years later he earned his doctorate from Oxford University, where he was a Rhodes Scholar at Balliol College. Following service with the U.S. Army, he taught at Harvard University and, from 1964 to 1974, he was a professor of history at Princeton University. Two of Dr. Billington's books, *The Icon and the Axe: An Interpretive History of Russian Culture* (1966) and *Fire in the Minds of Men: Origins of the Revolutionary Faith* (1980), were nominated for the National Book Award.

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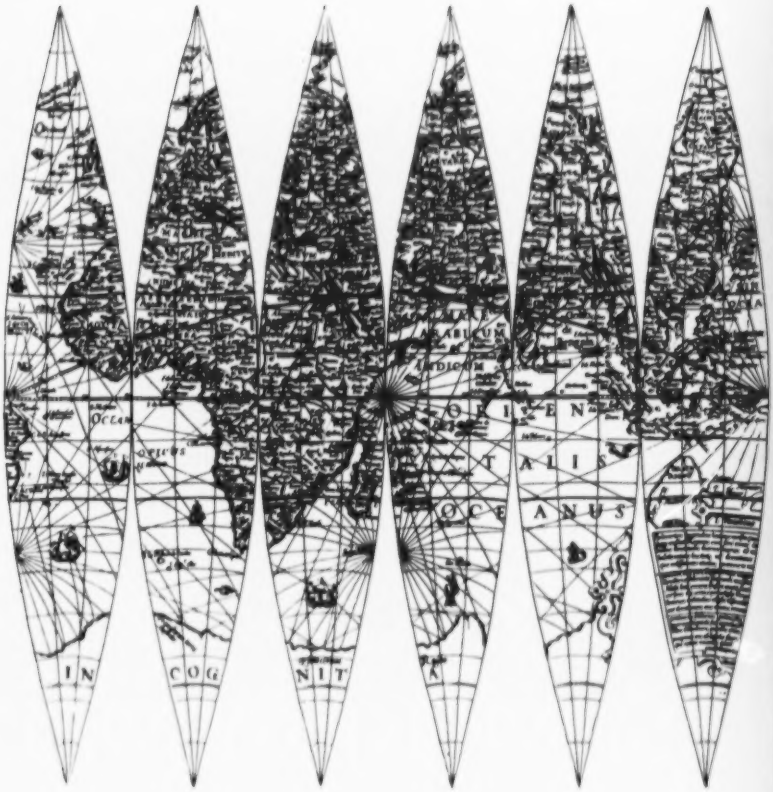
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